# Theorizing the (Anglican) *lex orandi*: a theological account[1]

Ashley Cocksworth
University of Roehampton, UK

This is a pre-publication version of an article forthcoming in *Modern Theology*.

## Word count

12779 words

## Abstract

This article aims to provide theorization of a prominent yet under-theorized feature of Anglican self-description: the *lex orandi* ('law of prayer'). The first section explores the historical origins and the reception of the law of prayer within Anglican theology. Then, a codification of the various operations of the *lex orandi* is offered in the second section guided by the law of prayer's three-fold work of correcting, communicating and complexifying Christian belief. The third, longer section pushes the discussion beyond Anglicanism by exploring the nature of Christian doctrine as it is re-routed through prayer and takes, as a sort of test case, aspects of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to display the 'complexifying' logic of the law of prayer. The central question of this investigation is: 'what, theologically speaking, does the *lex orandi* actually do?' The overall argument the *lex orandi* makes, then, is that doctrinal claims are not adequately understood, either historically or theologically, if the spiritual practice from which they emerge is side lined.

It has become commonplace to associate Anglicanism with the *lex orandi* ('law of prayer'). Not known for the depth of his engagement with Anglican theology, even Karl Barth knew enough to comment that Anglicanism 'desires to be understood not from its doctrine, but only from its

[1] Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Theology and Ethics Seminar at New College, the University of Edinburgh and at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham. I am grateful to those present (and especially to my respondent at Queen's, Mark Earey) for the discussion that helped to clarify and develop my argument. I am also grateful to Mike Higton for his generous engagement with a draft of this article and to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

*worship*, that is, to be exact, from personal participation in its daily worship.'[2] Of course, you need only recall Augustine's *Confessions* or the *Proslogion* by Anselm of Canterbury to locate this theo-doxological sensibility in a venerable tradition of composing theology in the context of prayer, of theology spilling over into prayer and praise. The *lex orandi*, however, concerns more than a genre of writing.

As it is received by Anglican theology, the *lex orandi* comes to express the way Anglicanism locates theological identity and self-understanding in the liturgy. This liturgical location of theological identity can be seen most emblematically in the status *The Book of Common Prayer* is granted within Anglicanism. The 1662 edition remains the liturgical and doctrinal standard of the Church of England. While permitting a latitude of doctrinal interpretation (especially in terms of its Eucharistic theology), *The Book of Common Prayer* ultimately aims to draw worshippers into communion through a single liturgy, a common prayer. The Anglican desire to fuse doctrine to the liturgy can further be seen in the appendixing of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1563) to the 1662 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*. The Articles, which is the closest the Church of England has come to articulating a definitive doctrinal statement, are published alongside and read in light of the liturgy. Anglican doctrine, quite literally in this case, is bound to Anglican liturgy.

A report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England for the period 1977-81 offers what was to become a well-replicated explanation for Anglicanism's attraction to the *lex orandi* as a marker of its identity. The law of prayer 'is crucial in Anglicanism', the report states, because Anglicanism 'accords a rather lower place than many other communions to explicit definitions of doctrine' such as confessional statements (say, a Westminster Confession)

[2] Karl Barth, *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 27. Writing from the particularities of his tradition, an example of Barth's own endorsement of the *lex orandi* principle can be found in Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1960), 90.

or the writings of influential figures (say, a Luther or a Calvin).[3] Despite its presence in other traditions, there remains an assumption, as implied by Barth, that the *lex orandi* becomes uniquely associated with Anglican theology. For Phyllis Tickle, the law of prayer·'*is* Anglicanism; or better said, there is no Anglicanism without it'.[4] Others have sought almost to deify the *lex orandi* as a sort of 'God of Anglican liturgy' – omnipotent and omnipresent, but also resistant to easy definition.[5] Indeed, for all the talk of the *lex orandi* and despite proving remarkably adaptable in its usage,[6] there remains little actual theorization of its theological nature and purpose.[7] Given Anglicanism's characteristic reliance upon the *lex orandi*, this lack of theorization seems especially odd.

---

[3] Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *Believing in the Church: The Corporate Nature of Faith* (London: SPCK, 1981), 81.

[4] Phyllis Tickle, 'Prayer', in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, ed. Mark D. Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke and Martyn Percy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 517-26 (517) – emphasis added.

[5] Margaret Elizabeth, '*Lex orandi est lex credendi*? The God of Anglican Liturgy', *New Blackfriars*, 97.1067 (2016), 52-73.

[6] To get a sense of the remarkable adaptability of the *lex orandi*, see its use in this wide range of theological endeavors: Stephen R. Holmes, 'Listening for the *Lex Orandi*: The Constructed Theology of Contemporary Worship Events', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 66.2 (2013), 192-208; Dennis O'Brien, *The Idea of a Catholic University* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); Bernd Wannenwetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Jonathan Kangwa, '*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*: Eco-Theological Perspectives on Christian Worship in Africa', *Expository Times*, 128.10 (2017), 479-90.

[7] Curiously, the *lex orandi* is largely omitted from the two most recent companion volumes relating to Anglicanism: *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies*, ed. Mark D. Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke and Martyn Percy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion,* ed. by Ian S. Markham, J. Barney Hawkins, Justyn Terry and Leslie Nuñez Steffensen (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). The *lex orandi* is surveyed more substantially by W. Taylor Stevenson

When the *lex orandi* is discussed, as suggested above, it is usually in the context of debate around Anglican identity (never a very clear concept). For some, the *lex orandi* gives helpful shape to an ecclesial profile otherwise lacking in the kind of criteria by which other churches self-describe. For as many others, the sheer diversity of liturgical practice within Anglicanism makes the *lex orandi* somewhat of a red herring in the search for ecclesial identity. Indeed, there are presently forty constituent churches within the Anglican Communion, each with their own liturgies. Often within a single constituent church there is more than one authorized liturgy. The authorised liturgy of the Church of England, for instance, consists of *The Book of Common Prayer* and the various volumes of *Common Worship*. Between these liturgies is significant diversity of practice. For example, there are several orders for the celebration of Holy Communion with alternative prefaces, eucharistic prayers and differing arrangements of *epicleses* from which individual churches can pick and choose. Positively, this liturgical diversity provides Anglican worship with a flexibility to adapt according to context and culture; negatively, the liturgy risks becoming as much a source of division as union. If the *lex orandi* is nothing more than the sum of its praxis then it too could be seen to prevent rather than provide shared identity.

While much has been said about the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the *lex orandi* as a marker of Anglican identity, detailed attention to its broader theological behavior is generally overlooked. However, with better theological grounding, it becomes evident that locating the essence of the *lex orandi* too squarely in the realm of praxis, as these debates tend to do, misses some of the christological point of prayer. There is something more fundamental at stake in the theology of the *lex orandi* than the practical question of prayer's performance. If Anglicans are to turn to prayer for common identity, then unity is to be found less in the ways

---

in this authoritative volume on Anglicanism: *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. by John E. Booty, Stephen Sykes and Jonathan Knight (London: SPCK, 1998), 187-202.

prayer is concretely practiced in the life of the church and more in the life to which prayer leads – that is, the praying life of Jesus Christ. Later this christological dynamic, revealed through our theological approach to the *lex orandi*, will be explored via the Augustinian notion of 'putting on' (*induere*) Christ in prayer.[8]

This article seeks to bypass these somewhat contentious intra-Anglican debates that tend to dominate Anglican readings of the *lex orandi*. At the same time, I hope to ask questions of and move beyond the way the *lex orandi* gets theorized outside of Anglicanism and specifically within the disciplinary area of liturgical theology. Here, the law of prayer is pulled in all sorts of directions as it gets embroiled in disagreement over the nature of the liturgy and its relation to formal, dogmatic 'belief'. These disagreements, which are often freighted with ideological concerns over the location of power and authority, seek to sort out the exact relation between the law of prayer and the law of belief (*lex credendi*). The resolutely theological theorization of the *lex orandi* undertaken in this article questions the way these discussions habitually separate theology off into 'primary' and 'secondary' discourses that have the *lex*

[8] Other ways into reflecting on and participating in the 'praying life of Jesus Christ' could include consideration of Jesus's prayer postures. As Pope Benedict has explored, arranging the praying body as Jesus arranged his – such as adopting the *orans* – helps to orientate the pray-er 'toward the face of God, toward the face of Jesus Christ, in seeing whom we are able to see the Father'. By adopting the *orans*, the pray-er is 'reminded of the extended arms of Christ on the Cross. … They are the wide embrace by which Christ wants to draw us to himself'. See Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2014), 198, 199. However, for many Anglicans, the most obvious route into participation in the life of Christ is through the Eucharist, as Hooker explores in his discussion of 'The necessity of the Sacraments unto the participation of Christ'. See Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Policy. Book V*, ed. by W. Speed Hill, The Folger Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), LVII. For an investigation of the interconnection of Eucharistic practice and theological reflection that aligns with the instincts of the *lex orandi*, see David Grumett, *Material Eucharist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

*orandi* and the *lex credendi* landing on either side of what become carefully policed distinctions. More adequate theorizations of the *lex orandi* are required.

The central question informing my investigation is, then: what, theologically speaking, does the *lex orandi* actually do? In terms of structure, there are three sections. The first explores the historical origins and the reception of the law of prayer within Anglican theology. Then, a codification of the various operations of the *lex orandi* is offered in the second section. Guiding my analysis in this section is what I take to be the law of prayer's three-fold work of correcting, communicating and complexifying Christian belief. The third, longer section pushes our discussion beyond Anglicanism by exploring the nature of Christian doctrine as it is re-routed through prayer and takes, as a sort of test case, aspects of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to display what I am calling the 'complexifying' logic of the law of prayer.

## Historical origins and Anglican receptions

To get an historical handle on the *lex orandi*, the fifth century is a good place to start. Customarily, the genealogy of the law of prayer traced to the enthusiastic but not uncritical disciple of Augustine, chronicler of Roman history,[9] Gallican monk and sometime secretary to Leo the Great: Prosper of Aquitaine (c.390-455). Although there are good reasons to pinpoint its provenance further back still – in fact, as we shall see, at least to Augustine himself, who invokes the law in arguably more theologically interesting ways – it is generally accepted that one of the last of Prosper's works in his capacity as *servus ecclesiae* is one of the first examples of the term in action. Dated between 435 and 442, 'Official Pronouncements of the Apostolic See on Divine Grace and Free Will' is a short dossier written as the title suggests in the heat of

[9] Prosper of Aquitaine, 'The Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine', in *From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader*, ed. and trans. by Alexander Callender Murray (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2000).

the semi-Pelagian controversy that was sweeping through the monasteries of Hadrumetum and Provence at the time.[10] As Prosper reports elsewhere in his correspondence with Augustine,[11] these monks with semi-Pelagian leanings teach that the beginning of faith is a work of the free will. Grace remains an external aid, prompting and priming damaged human nature, but the decision of faith ultimately resides in the freedom of the human agent. Unfolding in ten articles, the dossier delivers a blow-by-blow rebuttal of semi-Pelagian teaching, explaining at each point how it departs from the 'pronouncements made by the rulers of the Roman Church'. It is not accidental, as will become apparent, that a doctrinal debate over the relation between divine and human freedom gave rise to one of the first concrete uses of the *lex orandi*. However, in most respects the document remains theologically uneventful and at points almost ploddingly bureaucratic in its rehearsal of the ecclesial party line. Save, that is, for one sentence that sits somewhat unassumingly (given its legacy) halfway through its eighth article.

In *Pron.* 1-7, Prosper substantiates his case against semi-Pelagian constructions of the will and its ring-fencing of nature from grace by appealing to established biblical, creedal and especially papal sources. In each, grace is presented as necessary both for conversion and then perseverance 'in a good life' (*Pron*. 3). In these articles, Prosper goes out of his way to leave his reader in little doubt of semi-Pelagianism's doctrinal straying from the official teachings of the

[10] Prosper of Aquitaine, 'Official Pronouncements of the Apostolic See on Divine Grace and Free Will', in *Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St Augustine*, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 32 (New York, NY: Newman Press, 1963), 178-85 – hereafter, *Pron*. followed by article number. For detailed historical analysis of the term, see Paul De Clerck, '"*Lex orandi, lex credendi*": The Original Sense and Historical Avatars of an Equivocal Adage', *Studia Liturgica,* 24 (1994), 178-200 and for an account of his life and theology, see Alexander Yook Hwang, *Intrepid Lover of Perfect Grace: The Life and Thought of Prosper of Aquitaine* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

[11] Prosper's letter to Augustine is published in *Prosper of Aquitaine*, 21-37.

church. However, *Pron*. 8 strikes a new note. The eighth article introduces a further source of doctrinal authority into the theological mix: alongside biblical, creedal and papal sources, he now draws from the 'sacred prayers' of the church. Prosper selects one of the church's sacred prayers that he feels is in 'keeping with the apostolic tradition' and practiced 'the world over' (*Pron*. 8) as providing particularly clear evidence for the necessity of divine grace for both conversion and perseverance. He is referring to the liturgical practice of interceding for others as they come to faith.

> When the pastors of the Christian people discharge their mandate and mission, they plead the cause of the entire Church, beg and pray that faith may be given to unbelievers … . And the Church is so convinced that this is exclusively due to God's action that she offers perpetual thanksgivings to God as to its author and sings His praises for the light and grace bestowed on these people (*Pron*. 8).

The internal logics of the petition for God to 'give faith to unbelievers' and the subsequent thanksgiving in response to this 'bestowal' of grace display the doctrinal belief that grace chronologically precedes merit for conversion. Hence: 'Let the rule of prayer lay down the rule of faith' (*Pron*. 8).[12] More specifically, for Prosper these liturgical practices are the prayed examples of Augustine's theory of grace and thus provide the practical evidence against semi-Pelagianism alongside evidence assembled from biblical, creedal and papal sources.

Although regularly credited for making canonical the *lex orandi*, Prosper is perhaps better understood as the chronicler of the term than its diviner. It was at least Augustine before him who tested heresy against the same practices of prayer in his own anti-semi-Pelagian writing in the previous decade.[13] In fact, Augustine puts prayer to use in a

[12] Or, as it actually appears in the document, '*Lex supplicandi statuat legem credendi*', which became adapted and compacted to its current form.

[13] On this, see De Clerck, '"*Lex orandi, lex credendi*", 189-90. De Clerck argues that *Pron*. 8 is lifted from

theologically cleverer way: more to innovate new doctrine than affirm, as Prosper does, that which already had been determined. In *De dono perseuerantiae* (427-29), for example, which was written in reply to a letter from Prosper that predated the issuing of the 'Pronouncements', Augustine implores the church to put aside 'laborious arguments' and 'pay attention to its daily prayers. She prays that the non-believes may believe; God, therefore converts them to faith. She prays that believers may persevere; God, therefore, gives them perseverance to the end' (*De dono* 15).[14] Earlier in the same treatise Augustine cites his own experience of praying the Lord's Prayer (*De dono* 4-8) as further practical evidence to help his doctrinal cause. As we'll see later, this spiritual experience is then 'worked up' by Augustine into the doctrines for which he would be remembered. What we're already beginning to detect is Augustine deploying a kind of empirical argument *from* prayer against semi-Pelagian doctrine that arose from reflecting on his own spiritual experience and analyzing the actual liturgical practices of the church.

To return to Prosper's document, the next article extends the liturgical argument against semi-Pelagianism by citing baptismal practice and then the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer as further 'proof', he says, that God 'is the author of every good action, every good

---

Augustine's 426-48 correspondence with Vitalis, a Catholic layman in Carthage with semi-Pelagian leanings. For the letter, see Augustine, 'Letter 217', *Letters 211-270, Part 2, Volume 4*, trans. by Roland J. Teske, The Works of Saint Augustine, vol. 2/4 (New York, NY: New City Press, 2005), 51-66 – hereafter, *ep.* 217.

[14] Augustine, 'The Gift of Perseverance', *Answer to the Pelagians, IV: To the Monks of Hadrumetum and Provence*, trans. by Roland J. Teske, The Works of Saint Augustine, vol. 1/26 (New York, NY: New City Press, 1999), 149-87 – hereafter *De dono*. For the correspondence, which is published in the same volume, see 'A Letter of Prosper of Aquitaine to Augustine', 54-60. The overwhelming attention Augustine devotes to prayer in *De dono* prompts Ticciati to conclude that 'A better example of *lex orandi, lex credendi* it would be hard to find'. See Susannah Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 91. Parallel arguments from prayer are made in *ep.* 217.

effort, every virtuous move by which from the beginning of faith we draw near to God' (*Pron*. 9). God brings all action into being, Prosper is clear, in a way that does not destroy human free will but makes us free. Again, we'll have more to say about this later as we unpick the 'contemplative logic' that makes sense of this paradox. In the meantime, the key thing to emphasize is that his anti-semi-Pelagian argument reaches a liturgical crescendo, with doxological sources providing the final nail in the semi-Pelagian coffin.

Turning now to Anglican theology's reception of the *lex orandi*, despite its ascent to the highlife of Anglicanism, oddly the law of prayer has little significant presence in the writings of its historical architects. Thomas Cranmer, as far as I can tell, did not use the term himself in any explicit sense and despite devoting large chunks of his *Lawes* to the liturgical ceremonies of the Church of England, neither did Richard Hooker. It could be said that these figures inhabited the *lex orandi* 'unwittingly' such that they saw no need to lay out its mechanics in formal detail.[15] Indeed, it is entirely plausible that the *lex orandi* accounts for the doxological shape of Hooker's *Lawes* as well as inspiring other canonical sources, such as the seventeenth-century Anglican metaphysical poets. Be that as it may, it was not until the late nineteenth century that references to the *lex orandi* began to appear with some regularity in Anglican literature.[16] Around this same time the *lex orandi* was also being enshrined in the official

---

[15] Mark R. Lindsay, 'Thomas Cranmer and the Book of Common Prayer: Theological Education, Liturgy, and the Embodiment of Prosper's Dictum', *Colloquium*, 47.2 (2015), 195-207 (195).

[16] Robert Owen, *A Treatise of Dogmatic Theology* (London: J. T. Hayes, 1887) is a good example of an early adopter of the term. He explains that 'the basis of Anglican Theology is (presumably) *The Book of Common Prayer*; the *Lex orandi* is practically the *Lex credendi.*' See Owen, *A Treatise of Dogmatic Theology*, vii. There are numerous examples of equally non-committal references to the law of prayer in Anglican scholarship throughout this period. By the turn of the century, however, whole volumes carrying the term in their titles began to appear. In 1904, for example, the Roman Catholic convert from Anglicanism and Irish Jesuit priest George Tyrrell published *Lex Orandi: Or, Prayer and Creed* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1904) and then *Lex Credendi: A Sequel to Lex Orandi* (London: Longmans,

teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.[17] However, throughout this period we are dealing with passing references to a still undertheorized, rather vague notion that prayer has something or other to do with the specifics of Anglican theology. Whereas explicit declarations of the priority of the *lex orandi* are aplenty, what remains lacking in this period is detailed explanation of its theological method.

It would seem, then, that the *lex orandi*, as with so much of what is known as 'Anglicanism', appears to be a modern invention that is then projected back onto its earlier history. Perhaps this is part of an idealized continuity Anglicanism seeks with the 'decent order of the ancient fathers', as the Preface to the 1549 edition of the Prayer Book puts it. Just as the early church did theology in prayer, so too should Anglicanism. At this point it remains hard to assess what the *lex orandi* is doing beyond perpetuating Anglicanism's mythologizing of its history and identity.[18] Nevertheless, there is something *theologically* interesting that should not be missed about the *lex orandi*'s later-than-expected reception in Anglican theology.

---

Green and Co., 1906). Yet again, beyond their titles, these volumes contain little on the actual mechanics of the *lex orandi*.

[17] It was first deployed in the Papal Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* of December 1854, which proclaimed the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, and received more formal exploration in the writings of another Prosper, this time the French Benedictine Prosper Guéranger and the forth volume of his *Institutions Liturgiques* (Paris: Société Génerale de Librairie Catholique, 1885). For further analysis, see De Clerck, '"*Lex orandi, lex credendi*"', 193-95.

[18] On this, see Jean-Louis Quantin, 'The Fathers in Seventeenth-Century Anglican Theology', in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists – Volume 1*, ed. by Irena Backus (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 987-1008. Colin Gunton argues that Anglicanism's need to demonstrate continuity with the early church stems less from an earlier-the-better out-narration of other churches and more a result of finding it 'extremely difficult to appropriate material from any tradition other than its own deriving from the period between the Middle Ages and the mid-nineteenth century'. In other words, part of the Anglican obsession with the long tradition is about not knowing what to do with modernity. See Colin Gunton, 'An English Systematic Theology?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 46.4

Many have argued that the way modern theology comes to organize itself produces too sharp a distinction between the academic and the contemplative.[19] Graham Ward traces the detachment of theology from prayer back further, to the early twelfth century and then through to the emergence of Protestant dogmatics and in particular the later dogmatics of Melanchthon and emerging confessionalism (Augsburg, 1530; Heidelberg, 1563; Westminster, 1646).[20] Of Melanchthon's *Loci* of 1543/99, Ward writes, the '*lex credendi* is now divorced from the *lex orandi*. The pedagogy of affect (and sanctification) gives way to a mechanical technique for learning. This, in turns, changes the genre of the text – it no longer performs, it simply states, and puts a series of such statements into logical order'.[21] Although there are too many notable exceptions from the modern period for this meta-narrative of decline to be completely convincing (think how Schleiermacher, Barth, von Balthasar, Rahner differently but intentionally integrate prayer and theology), there is an emerging scholarly consensus that identifies some form of detachment of theology and contemplation taking place in the modern period. Whereas once they shared virtually indistinguishable interests, they are now separated off into distinct 'orders' with distinct responsibilities and or even rendered inherently suspicious of each other. As John Webster explains:

(1993), 479-96 (480).

[19] Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crisis of Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015); Mark A. McIntosh, 'Theology and Spirituality', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. by David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005; 3rd edition), 392-407; and Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[20] Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 173-74.

[21] Ward, *How the Light Gets In*, 110.

> It is no exaggeration to claim that a good deal of modern theology has been reluctant to consider contemplation a proper end of theological intelligence. The marks of this reluctance are not difficult to find. It may be seen, for example, in the remarkable prestige enjoyed by literary-historical science in the study of Holy Scripture; or in presentations of Christian doctrine which are devoid of metaphysical ambition and treat dogma as ancillary to the science of Christian practice which is first theology. The assumption (sometimes the explicitly articulated conviction) in both cases is that only the historical is the real, that intellect can extend itself no further than the economy of texts or moral practices. It is an impatient assumption, but one which has proved remarkably adept in shaping the purposes with which theological study is undertaken. Its elimination of the contemplative is an inhibition of theology's theological character.[22]

The 'prayer-denying' culture of modern theology,[23] where contemplation is at odds with the dogmatic task, can be seen in some of the commanding figures in the architecting of modernity. Perhaps most obviously is Kant, who although retained a space for prayer of sorts within his morality constructed an account of 'thinking' in deep hostility to what he called the 'fetishing' tendencies of prayer.[24] Hence modernity's spawning of the two extremes of *Dogmengeschichte* on the one hand and 'spirituality studies' on the other. The former tends to

---

[22] John Webster, *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology – Volume 1: God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 220.

[23] The term is Prevot's.

[24] Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 186. Likewise, for Nietzsche, prayer was 'invented for those who really never have thoughts of their own'. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appending of Songs* (New York, NY: Random House, 1974), 184.

obscure the historical and systematic import of spiritual experience by presenting the development of Christian doctrine as reducible to matters of the purely theoretical (and finds contemporary expression in much of the theological textbook industry). For example, the categories of prayer and spirituality are almost entirely absent from both Adolf von Harnack's prolegomena to his famed seven volume *History of Dogma* and Jaroslav Pelikan's five volume *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*,[25] which keeps to the conventions set by Harnack.[26] While the latter, the study of spirituality approach, too sanguinely extracts the praxis of prayer from its intensive interweaving with belief (and finds everyday expression in much of what passes as popular spirituality).[27] When reduced to praxis alone, the beliefs integrated in and assumed by prayer are sidelined or even distrusted altogether. Suggestively, at the very time much of modern theology was pulling away from a kind of theology that

[25] Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma – Volume 1* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1897), 1-40; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1971-89).

[26] Newman, as an exception to the rule, insists at the beginning of his famed essay on doctrinal development that 'Christianity is dogmatical, devotional, practical all at once'. See John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1878), 36. However, it is worth noting the 'liturgical turn' underway within the philosophy of religion that calls scholarly attention to religious 'action' as a way of countering its disciplinary preoccupation with the investigation and assessment of religious belief over matters practical and spiritual. James K. A. Smith's 'cultural liturgies' project is an example of this kind of work; see in particular his *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). The most recent contribution to the 'turn' is Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections on Religious Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For useful coverage of these developments, see Joshua Cockayne, 'Philosophy and Liturgy Part 1: Liturgy and the Philosophy of Action', *Philosophy Compass*, 13.10 (2018), e12547.

[27] For critiques of the *Dogmengeschichte* approach, see Jonathan Teubner, *Prayer after Augustine: A Study in the Development of the Latin Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20; for critiques of the study of spirituality approach, see Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: On the Integrity of Theology and Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 19-23.

depended on prayer, Anglican theology was not only refusing the caricature of prayer as the epitome of unthinking as pronounced by Kant and others but increasingly placing prayer front and centre.[28]

Another offspring of modern theology is the disciplinary area of liturgical theology. And it is here, finally, that we find anything approaching a 'theory' of the *lex orandi*. Driven especially by the liturgical movement of the twentieth century, which set about revising liturgies in response to the shifting pastoral needs of the time, some of the key theorizers of the law of prayer in this period include Geoffrey Wainwright (Methodist), Alexander Schmemann (Orthodox) and Aidan Kavanagh (Roman Catholic).[29] In the context of the ecumenical liturgical movement, questions of the relation between the church's doctrinal beliefs and its liturgical practice became newly urgent.

---

[28] It is curious to note two related theological attractions within the Anglican theology of the time. Around the same time as the *lex orandi* was gaining hold of the Anglican theological imagination, influential Anglican theologians found increasing attraction both to 'mysticism' and to the early church's central soteriological category, 'participation' – both relevant to the doxological tradition. On mysticism, see Dean Inge's 1899 Bampton Lecturers, appropriately delivered in an ecclesial setting, published as *Christian Mysticism* (London: Methuen and Co., 1989); Evelyn Underhill's 1911 *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002); and Kenneth Kirk's 1928 Bampton Lectures published as *The Vision of God: The Christian Doctrine of the 'Summum Bonum'* (Cambridge: James Clark, 1977). On participation, see A. M. Allchin's justly celebrated *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Theology* (London: Darton, Longmann and Todd, 1988). Allchin's retrieval of participation as a staple within Anglian theology can be seen as a precursor to the centrality of the theme in Radical Orthodoxy, which has, of course, strong Anglican provenance and majors on the theological function of the liturgy.

[29] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology* (London: Epworth Press, 1980); Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986; 2nd edition); Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York, NY: Pueblo Publishing, 1984).

When the *lex orandi* enters the arena of liturgical studies, however, it becomes quickly embroiled in a political debate over power and control. Take Aidan Kavanagh's influential *On Liturgical Theology* (1984) as an example. For this Benedictine liturgical scholar, Christian theology can be distinguished and then hierarchized into two discrete discourses: *theologia prima* and *theologia secunda*. The church is to find its primary theological voice in its prayer life rather than in its doctrine, which Kavanagh relegates to the realm of 'secondary theology'.[30] Framing the relation in these contrastive ways, belief must now answer to prayer, the real theological deal, and the law of prayer becomes the principal mechanism of doctrinal correction and control. In an inversion of modernity's prioritization of belief over practice, the *lex orandi* becomes almost a law unto itself: what the church does liturgically takes theological priority over what it believes doctrinally.

While he is cited, indeed his maxim provides the book's epigraph, Prosper is doing something considerably more complex than Kavanagh's undialectical assertion of prayer over doctrine. Prosper is hardly soft on doctrine. Writing in the name of the 'Apostolic See' and as a disciple of Augustine, he is *profoundly* interested in doctrine. In fact, he introduces the *lex orandi* into his argument only after he has exhausted apostolic precedent, papal teaching, creedal extracts and biblical sources. Look first to the Bible, he says, and to the way the Bible is interpreted in the life of the church and only then appeal to prayer; and even then, only the kind of prayer that is practiced 'the world over in every Catholic church' (*Pron.* 8). Perhaps this is why Prosper's parting words had nothing to do with prayer and everything to do 'what the *writings* of the Apostolic See … have taught us' (*Pron.* 10 – emphasis added). His practice of doctrinal argument, highly constellated as it is, gives no indication that orthodoxy relies singlehandedly on prayer as a sort of trump card in the way Kavanagh's handling of the *lex*

[30] Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 74-78.

*orandi* seems to suggest. After all, the invocation of liturgical evidence on both sides of the Arian controversy in the previous century offered a telling lesson that the practice of prayer, *ipso facto*, is too malleable a thing to discriminate heresy from orthodoxy.[31]

However admirable Kavanagh's attempt to turn the tables on problematic constructions of prayer as antithetical to modern theology might be, the way he theorized the law of prayer can only sting, not wound, the steady detachment of modern theology from its 'contemplative end' as it leaves the more fundamental issue untouched – that is, not the exaltation of theory over practice, but their very decoupling. As the other side of the same coin minted by the same modern logics, Kavanagh's subordination of the *lex credendi* to the *lex orandi* repeats and reinforces the very problem he seeks to resolve.[32] The result: an ironic widening of the gulf between affectively embodied spirituality and conceptually orientated theology from precisely the opposite direction. As Ward explains,

---

[31] Athanasius's use of liturgical evidence against the Arian subordination of the divinity of the Son is well-documented. Arguing against the Arians, Athanasius explains that in prayer 'we invoke no originate thing, no ordinary man, but the natural and true Son from God, who has become man, yet is not the less Lord and God and Saviour'. See Athanasius, 'Four Discourses against the Arians', in *St Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, series 2, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 306-447 (411). For further investigation of the role of the liturgy in the formation of Athanasius's doctrinal argumentation, see Thomas G. Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), 103-20. However, on the other side, as Maurice Wiles notes, 'it was the opponents of the new orthodoxy who could (and did) most easily appeal to the precise structure of the Church's liturgy as lending support for their views'. See Maurice Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine: A Study in the Principals of Early Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 75. In a similar vein, Williams finds in the Alexandrian liturgical tradition a source for Arius's doctrinal thought. See Rowan Williams, 'Angels Unawares: Heavenly Liturgy and Earthly Theology in Alexandria', *Studia Patristica*, 30 (1997), 350-63.

[32] 'To reverse the maxim, subordinating the standard of worship to the standard of belief, makes a shambles of the dialectic of revelation', see Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 92.

> This understanding of theology [in which doctrine is viewed as 'second order' reflection upon 'first order' ecclesial practice] can easily separate the theory from the practice. … Push this reductive tendency further and we end up trying to articulate a 'pure theology' or view theology in functional, intellectual terms.[33]

When theology is siphoned off like this into an intellectual, propositional zone it becomes, under the conditions of modernity, professionalized, classed, gendered and raced.[34] These distinctions have a habit of sticking such that systematic theology and practical theology remain on either side of a carefully protected disciplinary divide.

In his magisterial study of the same period, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology* (1980), Geoffrey Wainwright argues convincingly that there is a degree of reciprocity implied by the *lex orandi*, both in terms of its grammatical construction and as it is concretely used by Prosper, which permits a more integrated understanding of belief and practice than is acknowledged by many other liturgical theologians. 'The linguistic ambiguity of the Latin tag corresponds to a material interplay which in fact takes place between worship and doctrine in Christian practice: worship influences doctrine, and doctrine worship.'[35] Despite all sorts of theological possibilities unlocked by Wainwright's more reciprocal theorization, his principal concern remains, as with Kavanagh, in the *process* of their relation – that is, the issue of *how* belief and liturgical practice can be said to relate. The theologically interesting possibility he presents but leaves unresolved is the very question at the heart of our investigation, again: what does the *lex orandi*, now reciprocally understood, actually do?

---

[33] Ward, *How the Light Gets In*, 120; see also, 171.

[34] On this, see 'Part 1' of Prevot, *Thinking Prayer*.

[35] Wainwright, *Doxology*, 280.

## Codifying the law of prayer

We have detailed the historical origins of the *lex orandi* and traced its reception within Anglican theology. Before making more explicit the kinds of theological possibilities the *lex orandi* offers, we will pause, in the light of our findings, to attempt some formal mapping of the law of prayer.

Theologians speak with frequency and varying degrees of specificity of the 'shaping', formative value of Christian doctrine on the practical life.[36] But what remains under-recognized, if we are to take the *lex orandi* at its word, is that religious experience, desire and practices of prayer also have a shaping effect on Christian doctrine. The *lex orandi* speaks of exactly this enormously complex tangle of belief and practice that sits at the heart of the Christian life. It seeks, in a word, the best kind of 'harmony' between the things we do in prayer and the things we believe. To render the *lex orandi* in these terms replaces the logic Kavanagh sets up of the liturgy *then* doctrine (which too simplistically reverses modernity's own compromising 'then' logic) with an 'and' logic that understands the primary role of the *lex orandi* as being about integrating belief and practice.

[36] The 'shaping' impact of Christian doctrine on religious experience is developed, of course, by Lindbeck in his 'linguistic-cultural' model. See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984). Given our present argument there are questions, however, as to whether Lindbeck underplays the flip-side of his argument – that is, the shaping impact of religious experience on Christian doctrine. 'First come the objectivities of religion, its language, doctrines, liturgies, and modes of action, and it is through these that passions are shaped into various kinds of what is called religious experience.' See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 39. For critical engagement with Lindbeck on this issue, see Simeon Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines', *Modern Theology*, 31.3 (2015), 428-44.

Thus, the *lex orandi* pays explicit attention to the ways our beliefs about God and God's ways in the world are embedded in the humdrum reality of everyday life. It seeks to ensure those beliefs neither just float around in a vacuum detached from the everyday nor become constructed in exclusively propositional, intellectualist ways as simply the set of ideas that one has mentally affirmed. Similarly, the *lex orandi* is attentive to the ways Christian doctrine guides, describes and makes sense of the praxis of prayer. Dislocated from its doctrinal anchoring prayer is left unguarded against the constant threat of idolatry. Put differently, the law of prayer seeks iconoclastically to locate the everyday practice of prayer in a broader narrative that reaches beyond the bounds of its own praxis.

Understood along these lines, a different spin is put on the theological function of 'orthodoxy'. The problem with semi-Pelagianism was not necessarily its biblical fidelity or its conceptual coherence, but its failure to practice what it preached.[37] Throughout his letter to Vitalis, Augustine expends great energy pinpointing the logical inconsistencies between semi-Pelagian teaching and its practices of prayer. 'If you admit that we should pray for them [unbelievers]', shouldn't these practices 'assent to the same teachings?' (*ep.* 217.8), he asks. Or more pointedly,

> When you hear the priest of God at his altar exhorting the people to pray to God, or when you hear him praying aloud that God would compel unbelieving peoples to come to faith in him, will you not respond 'Amen?' Or will you argue in opposition to the soundness of this faith? (*ep.* 217.26).

[37] As Zahl argues: 'doctrinal disputes in the history of theology are rarely purely exegetical, logical, or traditional, but often relate to a whole vision of what it is to be a Christian person in the world, and take for granted that one cannot make a wise decision about whether to support a doctrine without taking its full practical impact and affective shape into account.' See Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines', 434.

These liturgical practices, which we are to assume were part of the liturgical culture of the Hadrumetum and Provence monasteries, perform a doctrinal logic that seems to disagree with the teaching to which semi-Pelagian adheres. In this scheme of things, the semi-Pelagian controversy was not simply a doctrinal debate over grace and its relation to human freedom. It was also a debate over the relation between the doctrine of grace and the way that doctrine is to be concretely performed in the life of prayer. The Augustinian theory of grace triumphed not necessarily because it was more 'biblical' or more conceptually coherent. In fact, Augustine's theory of the entanglement of divine and human freedom, which Prosper cites in terms of the paradox that grace 'does not take away free will but rather sets it free' (*Pron.* 8), is conceptually untidier than Pelagius's neat allocation of divine and human freedom as independent of one another. Augustine's theory triumphed, rather, because it made *better sense* of the relationship between the doctrine of grace and the experience of God's grace in prayer: it better protected the 'integrity', the hanging together of belief and spiritual practice. Thus the maintenance of ortho*doxy*, for Augustine, is very literally about dealing with right prayer. 'For, if the Church in fact asks this [to preserver in faith] of him, but thinks that she gives it to herself, she does not have prayers that are genuine, but ones which are merely external formalities. Heaven forbid that this be so!' (*De dono* 63).

With these general reflections in mind, we can begin to be more precise about the work of the *lex orandi* by unpicking three intertwined strands: it corrects, communicates and then complexifies Christian belief. First to the 'corrective' role. The *lex orandi* encourages attentiveness to the relation of individual formulations of belief and the actual lived practices of the community. If these fall out of step with each other, the *lex orandi* seeks to reorient them toward better harmony. The original invocation of the *lex orandi* is a good example of this kind of corrective work in action. In place of harmony, Augustine detected dissonance. The particular set of doctrinal beliefs being articulated by the semi-Pelagians conflicted with the established liturgical practices of the church. He invoked the *lex orandi* as a way of smoothing

this tension. It is important to emphasize again that the liturgical practice Augustine and then Prosper selects (interceding for the unconverted) is carefully chosen for its deep rootedness in the life of the church. It claims both biblical and apostolic precedent and universality. In this sense, for Prosper's *lex orandi*, not all liturgical practices carry equal weight. I cannot simply ditch the doctrine of Christ's divinity because it does not sit well with the prayers I prayed last night before bed. There is clearly a difference between a public liturgy of prayer, even one said alone, and private extempore prayer, not least because doctrinally speaking the latter may well be less intentionally coherent. Prosper's concern is with the prayers the church practices corporately, the 'world over' (*Pron*. 8). After all, the corrective work of the *lex orandi* does not flow asymmetrically: it goes both ways. Doctrine corrects misdirected prayer as much as the other way around.

The corrective strand of the *lex orandi* works on a larger scale too by seeking to repair a whole host of binaries that have come to operate in modern theology. It disturbs the too neat divisions between theology and spirituality, primary and secondary theology, prayer and ethics, the affective and cognitive, the theoretical and pastoral, the academic and ecclesial. Prayer bends around these binaries, strapped as it is between theory and practice. Fundamentally, however, the *lex orandi* seeks the re-orientation of Christian theology toward what is classically taken to be its most appropriate telos: praise and doxology.[38] In the process of orientating theology toward its doxological *sine qua non*, the very language used to speak of God is corrected and transformed. The failure of the language we use to speak of God nevertheless retains in prayer referential purchase on God as it is first purged of its idolatrous

[38] For an (Anglican) articulation of Christian doctrine that is shot through with praise, see David F. Ford and Daniel W. Hardy, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 113.

wonderings and then transposed into doxological registers.[39] Orientated doxologically, Christian belief is left unfinished – the full stop at the end of the sentence is removed, theology is rendered constantly in flux, on the go, in the middle of things and dependent on God's communication of God. Prayer pushes further still into a deeper kind of knowledge, stretching belief beyond the propositional into the unfathomable knowledge God has of God.

Alongside correcting belief, the *lex orandi* has a second, 'communicative' role to play in the life of the church. If Christian belief requires a medium, then that medium is prayer. Belief is collected, communicated and conveyed from one generation to the next via the vehicle of prayer. Think of how Prosper argued that the church's practices of intercession, its baptismal practice and the petitions of the Lord's Prayer liturgically perform and intrinsically embody a particular set of doctrinal claims about grace, which have been communicated down the ages from apostolic times. Or consider how in the Methodist tradition its distinctive theology is transmitted through its sung worship. Analogous Anglican examples might include how the Collects of *The Book of Common Prayer* distill and then convey a distinctive kind of Reformation doctrine of forgiveness and how the words and actions of the liturgy of Holy Communion communicate in various ways a particular take on the doctrine of salvation.[40] In its communicative mode, there is no such thing as 'mere' prayer. It is always heavy with meaning, drenched in doctrine. In short, prayer is involved in the production and expression of doctrinal belief. It is 'information-bearing' as it communicates those beliefs from one

[39] This is abundantly the case in the scores of mystical writers who perhaps inhabit the *lex orandi* most deeply of all and point to prayer as the primary vehicle to speak of the unspeakable God.

[40] The scholarly consensus is that Cranmer was pursuing with some resolve a particular doctrinal agenda that would lead the Church of England, over the long-haul, in an unambiguously evangelical direction. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 454-516. *The Book of Common Prayer* would play a critical role in the long-term theological shaping of the Church of England according to the evangelical faith embraced by Cranmer.

generation to the next. Through prayer, Christian belief is 'handed on', in a MacIntyrean sense, and identity is formed. Such a prioritization of prayer is not without risk, as Lauren F. Winner has argued.[41] Neither should it discount the identity-forming significance of other Christian practices. To pursue a Hauerwasian line, practices of truth-telling, enemy-loving, feeding the hungry and seeking justice in the world also embody and transmit Christian truth. Likewise, preaching may very well form Christian identity along lines not dissimilar to what I am suggesting might take place in and through prayer. Why, then, the privileging of this particular practice?

A privileging of prayer is hardwired into the identity of Anglicanism. When devising the liturgical programme of *The Book of Common Prayer*, Cranmer was influenced by, although gave a characteristic 'evangelical twist' to, the Benedictine monastic life which dominated the religious culture of England at the time.[42] During this period of dissolution, Cranmer sought to preserve these formative, monastic practices and extend them for the nation at large, making common what was once cloistered. For example, the Benedictine rhythm of daily prayer was simplified into the two offices of Morning and Evening prayer; and the psalmody, ever the Benedictine *leitmotif*, took on central significance in the church's public prayers. Cranmer also learnt from the Benedictine monastic life that enclosed within all work (*labora*) is prayer (*ora*): prayer is implicated in every aspect of the Christian life. The '*ora*' in both the Benedictine *labora* and the Anglican *orandi* is shorthand, then, for something more than a

[41] For an exploration of the 'malformative' potential of prayer, see Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018). Critical of the strikingly 'rosy' adoption of practices that defines so much of post-liberal theology, Winner argues that 'prayer carries within itself the possibility of its own deformation'. See Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 18.

[42] MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 128.

momentary practice that comes and goes as we clasp and unclasp our hands. Prayer, in the monastic sense of the term, is a habit: not so much a thing we do (at the cost of other things we might do) as the thing through which all things are done, encompassing the whole of our lives. Thus to follow fully Hauerwas's ecclesial ethics means that those practices of truth-telling, enemy-loving, feeding the hungry and seeking justice in the world gain meaning precisely in the context of the church's prayer life.[43] We learn the meaning of loving our enemy as we bring those who persecute us before God in prayers of intercession; we counter the injustices of the world as we encounter alternative, peaceable scripts for acting in the world in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer; and so on. In this sense, prayer is prior to preaching and action, and the foundation to them both, because it is through the prayerful reading of scripture that the church has a word to preach and through participating in the prayer of Christ that the church knows how and where to act. Indeed, if there is one thing *The Book of Common Prayer* makes clear it is this: being human means being in prayer. Prayer is never less than twice daily, the Bible is read in and through the context of prayer and praise, and from birth to death every *rite de passage* becomes a rite of prayer. As Brian Cummings explains, '[m]ore than a book of devotion, then, this is a book to live, love, and die to.'[44]

However, there is more to the *lex orandi* than the inherently conservative work of correcting and communicating Christian doctrine. At risk of overloading, there is a third strand of its work, to which we now turn, that gives the law of prayer some constructive bite. The *lex orandi* holds together, communicates and then 'complexifies' the nature of belief and

---

[43] For an example of the grounding of these and many other Christian practices in the context of the liturgy, see Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) which displays many of the hallmarks of Hauerwas's thinking.

[44] Brian Cummings, 'Introduction', *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. by Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xii.

practice. The friction that comes from rubbing prayer and doctrine against each other leaves both looking more complex than when kept apart. While existing theorizations of the *lex orandi* have been alert to the first and second, the third, complexifying strand of the *lex orandi*, which has the most theological promise, remains somewhat more neglected.

## Complexification

The Anglican theologian Maurice Wiles is more attentive than others in the discipline of *Dogmengeschichte* to the (both positive and negative) role prayer played in the development of Christian doctrine. In his classic essay, *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, Wiles argues that some of the earliest practices of prayer assumed a doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ before those beliefs were formalized into something recognisably doctrinal – such as a creed.[45] What was being assumed when early Christians called upon Christ as 'Lord' in prayer (a term reserved for the divine) or directed prayers 'to' Jesus (when God alone was worthy of thanks and praise) was an as yet unwritten doctrine of divine Sonship. When the time came for more precise christological definition, which was made more urgent by the onset of the Arian controversy, whatever doctrinally was being said about the person of Jesus Christ could not, Wiles instructs, 'fall short of the manner of his address in worship'.[46] Doctrine and prayer had to make sense of each other in order to make sense themselves.

It is not simply the fact of prayer being caught up in the process of doctrinal development but the *way* it contributed that is significant for our purposes. The experience of

[45] More recent work on so-called 'Early High Christology' makes the same point with less of a sceptical subtext. For a representative example, see Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[46] Wiles, *The Making of Christian Doctrine*, 65.

God in prayer led to fresh articulations of received formulations. Here, true to form, the *lex orandi* is acting in a radical, daring way – pushing doctrinal thinking forward, forcing the early church (beginning with Paul and the Gospel writers) to confront the conceptual headache of multiple divinities, contributing to a 'revolution in the doctrine of God' and in the process making the language of the church a good deal more complex.[47] It was Arius, after all, who represented the more straightforward option of a less-than-divine Jesus and favoured a 'theology of repetition' over the risker labour of doctrinal innovation, of moving beyond tradition into unchartered areas.[48] Orthodoxy was progressive. It was more willing to improvise on the doctrinal impulses of the Christ-shaped practices of prayer even if those improvisations would lead to the inconvenient truth of the Son's divinity. The problem with Arius's Christology is the same as Pelagius's doctrine of grace: it is not that it didn't make sense, but that it made *too* much sense of the mystery of God. Ortho*doxy*, on the other hand, defers to the odd, to the stranger things of prayer. Contrary, then, to the epistemological conventions of modernity that imply prayer's dulling of the mind with an uncritical piety, the *lex orandi* insists that Christian belief ends up being *more* not less intellectually demanding because of prayer.

Christology is one doctrine among many that is complexified by the experience of God in prayer. Another example is the doctrine of the Trinity. As Sarah Coakley argues in her 'prayer-based' model of the Trinity, thinking about God in a way that takes with systematic seriousness the experience of prayer leads to a far more radical, complex construction of trinitarian relations and our 'incorporation' into that divine life than is conventional in

---

[47] Ford and Hardy, *Julilate*, 68.

[48] I am alluding to the 'theological postscript' of Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001; 2nd edition), 233-45 (235).

conciliar negotiations of the doctrine.[49] However, the aim of what follows is not pursue any further the complexifying implications of prayer for theological reflection on Christology or the Trinity, but rather to track this same complexifying logic through a doctrine that might initially appear less obviously shaped by the practice of prayer than Christology or indeed the Trinity. That doctrine is the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and we'll focus in particular on its implications for the question of agency.

The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, as generally told by the modern dogmatic tradition, develops to meet a theological concern to distinguish the Christian doctrine of creation from other accounts of how the world came into being. It is taken be a sort of philosophical argument that sets the conditions for things like the sovereign transcendence of God and the problem of evil. However, what tends to be omitted from 'history of dogma' tellings of this story is the doctrine's entanglement with spiritual matters. If the emerging scholarly consensus on the role of prayer in modern theology is anything to go by, this is not accidental, but part of an intentional strategy to wrestle doctrine free from the perceived murkiness of spiritual experience.

The theological decision to overinterpret the philosophical at the expense of the spiritual is not without its consequences. It is well documented that something happens within the intellectual conditions of modern theology to render it conceptually strained to think of God as transcendent while at the same time holding to any meaningful sense of God's active presence in the world. According to William Placher, in this period the complex dialectic of divine presence and transcendence becomes newly constructed in opposition to each other: *either* God is transcendent *or* present, but not both.[50] Relatedly, according to Kathryn Tanner's

[49] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 100-51.

[50] William Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking When Wrong* (Louisville, MI:

influential argument, these newly rendered tensions in the doctrine of God filter down onto the agential level so that divine and human agency become locked into a similarly contrastive setup, with each doing their bit of the work: *either* divine sovereignty *or* human freedom, but not both.[51] If it isn't accidental that these developments were taking place at the very time modern theology was separating prayer and theology as discrete practices of the church, it may well be that the competitive underpinnings of the divine presence/absence and divine agency/human agency dichotomies are actually symptomatic of the theology/prayer binary introduced into modern theology.

The re-integration of theology and spirituality, then, which we have said is the prerogative of the *lex orandi*, affords new possibilities to circumvent the competitive underpinnings of modern theology. Such a re-integration, Rowan Williams says, means that the 'doctrine of creation, properly understood, … grounds … our contemplation'.[52] While it may be true that contemplation is rightly ordered and rooted in the doctrinal context of creation, we can dig further into the work of the *lex orandi* than Williams goes to unearth a dynamic in which the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* not only helps to make sense of the experience of prayer, but is itself made sense of in the doxological and contemplative matrix of prayer.

Before getting into the conceptual depths opened up by contemplation and the resources it offers to think through the relation of divine and human agency non-contrastively there is a more immediate implication of the rooting of the doctrine of creation in prayer. For

---

Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

[51] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

[52] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 75.

Augustine, writing in a well-known section of the *Confessions*, creation *ex nihilo* determines that all things are brought into existence and sustained in that existence by God (*Conf.* XII).[53] There is nothing that is not created by God and God's creation does not depend on anything but God. All sorts of critical theological, ethical and metaphysical factors are leading Augustine to his understanding of creation *ex nihilo*, the implications of which have been well covered by existing literature. Yet a more basic issue risks being passed over in the rush to arrive at these implications. More basically, Augustine's thinking is driven by doxological factors and two in particular.

First, creation *ex nihilo* grounds our calling upon God in the mysterious beckoning of God who calls all things, including prayer, into being. 'Before I called to you, you were there before me' (*Conf.* XIII.1). For Augustine, being human always means responding to a prior call: this is the cornerstone of his anthropology. Second, Augustine's analysis that all good things come from God tells us that the paradigmatic creaturely response to God's prior action is unreserved gratitude. Being human is about saying thanks to the God who creates all good things for all good things. Hence, the *Confessions* is at once a confession of sin and 'confession as praise'.[54] 'To you I owe my being and the goodness of my being' (*Conf.* XIII.1). Writing of creation *ex nihilo* and citing the Gloria from *The Book of Common Prayer*, Williams has this to say:

> Before the literally inconceivable fact of the divine difference and the divine liberty, we have no words except thanksgiving that, because God's life *is what it is*, we are. 'We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory.'[55]

---

[53] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[54] For his full reflections on the double nature of *confessio*, see Augustine, 'Exposition of Psalm 137', *Exposition of the Psalms: 121-150*, trans. Maria Boulding, The Works of Saint Augustine, vol. III/20 (New York, NY: New City Press, 2002), 242-55.

[55] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 75.

The confrontation with our being from nothing, which is most fully experienced in the contemplative waiting before the otherness of the divine, evokes thanksgiving to God for all good things. Although the doctrine of creation, construed doxologically, doesn't provide much propositional content about the *whys* and *hows* of God's creating, it does give a sense of what 'gift' means and of what it means to live in response to God's gift of grace.

I want now to drill down into what Augustine has to say about the relation between divine and human agency as conceived within the doxological matrix of the *lex orandi*. My argument can be stated quite clearly. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* gets distorted when it is abstracted from the context of prayer: here, divine difference is mistaken for God's absolute absence. Indeed, God's simultaneous presence in and otherness from the world is not something that can be adequately explained or described. It is better understood as something *felt* and in some way expressed in the experience of prayer.[56]

Take, for example, John of the Cross's experience of prayer.[57] The experience John writes up in *The Dark Night* could be the very experience of divine difference that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* seeks to explicate. In prayer, John seemed to feel God's radical – almost tormenting and terrifying – otherness. Whatever else God is, God is not felt to be a familiar thing; hence his feeling of abandonment, affliction, emptiness, even rejection. However, this experience of divine difference is more complicated than a straightforward feeling of absolute

[56] Two recent investigations of the doctrine of divine difference converge on a shared affirmation of prayer as the unique means through which the God-world distinction is experienced, see Brian D. Robinette, 'Undergoing Something from Nothing: The Doctrine of Creation as Contemplative Insight', in *The Practice of the Presence of God: Theology as a Way of Life*, ed. by Martin Laird and Sheelah Treflé Hidden (London: Routledge, 2017), 17-28 and Christopher R. J. Holmes, 'Revisiting the God/World Difference', *Modern Theology*, 34.2 (2018), 159-76.

[57] For further analysis of the relation between contemplation and creation in John of the Cross, which has helped my thinking here, see Robinette, 'Undergoing Something from Nothing'.

absence from God. What he seemed to experience in prayer was a really deep sense of the divine difference that was, at the same time, a really deep sense of divine presence. These odd dynamics stubbornly defy easy conceptualization. Indeed, they remain in the abstract until belief and practice are reconnected. This is why Susannah Ticciati argues that creation *ex nihilo* has 'no currency for the conceptual imagination: divine agency cannot be thought or envisaged. And it follows from this that if it is to have currency at all, it must take hold, beyond the intellect, in practice – or in lived transformation'.[58] The experience of God in prayer does not correlate with the modern convention of *either* divine presence *or* absence but instead embodies their simultaneity and complexity.

To explicate the implications of this for the agency question, we find ourselves returning full circle to the heart of the very debate that inspired the law of prayer in the first place. Semi-Pelagianism was locked into what can now be seen as a competitive framework in which divine and human action each does 'their bit of the work' independently of each other.[59] In terms of prayer, this means that I pray, then God does something about it, then I respond. However, as far as Augustine understands it, the actual experience of prayer cannot be mapped so neatly onto these sharply defined agential lines.

One of Augustine's chief anti-Pelagian works, *De dono perseuerantiae*, begins with a petition-by-petition commentary on the Lord's Prayer (*De dono* 4-9) and returns to the theme of prayer at the end of the treatise (*De dono* 63-64). This, in itself, says a great deal about the role of prayer in Augustine's anti-Pelagian thought. What invites further probing is the way Augustine goes about using prayer in this doctrinal context. Whereas his use of the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of *De dono* is much the same as Prosper's in *Pron.* 9 – that is, it supplies

[58] Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism*, 96.

[59] Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism*, 65.

the liturgical evidence to support his doctrinal thinking – a different approach is taken in his return to prayer at the end of the treatise. There, now shifting from synoptic to Pauline material, we encounter Augustine moving much more within the *lex orandi*'s complexifying mode – that is, he draws from the raw materials of his own prayer life to venture a sort of empirical argument from prayer against semi-Pelagianism's too simplistic presentation of divine and human agency as each doing their bit of the work.[60]

In *De dono* 64, for example, we encounter Augustine drawing concretely from his spiritual practice. He is well aware that 'we pray; that is, that we ask, seek and knock'. In other words, he is as sure that prayer is a genuinely human action as he is that prayer is not simply or only human action. What he is experiencing in prayer is not only his asking, seeking and knocking but, as he proceeds to explain, *God's* asking, seeking and knocking. He interprets this experience through the Pauline notion of the Holy Spirit 'crying out' of him the prayer 'Abba, Father' (Rom. 8. 15-16). Prayer is more than either simply his asking or straightforwardly a work of God in him. Rather, prayer is the agentially complex action of God 'making *us* cry out' (*De dono* 64): divine and human agency unite in the single calling upon God without competition or confusion.

Elsewhere, in other engagements with Pauline material (and especially Gal. 3.26-27), Augustine makes similar argument about prayer – though this time he expresses them christologically. In these writings he explains that his experience of prayer feels like 'putting

[60] The chapter directly following this meditation contains Augustine's most explicit endorsement of the *lex orandi* principle: 'if the Church has always prayed for these benefits, it has always believed them to be certainly God's gifts', *De dono* 65.

on' or being 'clothed by' (*induere*) Christ.[61] As he 'puts on' Christ, he can speak back, as it were, to God 'with Christ's voice'.[62] Thus in his sermon on Psalm 85, Augustine explains:

> [W]hen we speak to God in prayer we do not separate the Son from God, and when the body of the Son prays it does not separate its head from itself. The one sole saviour of his body is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of' God, who prays for us, prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, and is prayed to as our God. Accordingly we must recognize our voices in him, and his accents in ourselves.[63]
>
> We pray, then, to him, through him and in him; we speak with him and he speaks with us. We utter in him, and he utters in us.[64]

---

[61] For a fascinating exploration of the christological process of '*induere*' that informs much of what follows, see Teubner, *Prayer after Augustine*, 66-84.

[62] Augustine 'Exposition of Psalm 85', *Expositions of the Psalms: 73-98*, trans. Maria Boulding, The Works of Saint Augustine, vol. III/18 (New York, NY: New City Press, 2002), 220-45 (238). The bodily notion of praying through the 'mouth' of Christ would be developed by Calvin and then Barth who together extend the reference originally used by Augustine in the context of praying the psalmody into all Christian prayer. See John Calvin, 'Catechism of the Church of Geneva (1545)', in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, The Library of Christian Congress (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 88-139 (122) and Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4 – Lecture Fragments* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 105. In his magisterial essay on liturgical Apollinarianism T. F. Torrance likewise presses for a strong christological rooting of prayer via an emphasis on the vicarious priesthood of the Son. Apart from the mediatorial activity of the praying Christ, we are 'thrown back upon ourselves', Torrance says, without the means (the grace) to pray as we ought. See T. F. Torrance, 'The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy', in *Theology in Reconciliation*: *Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 139–214 (205).

[63] Augustine, 'Exposition of Psalm 85', 220, cited in Teubner, *Prayer after Augustine*, 79.

[64] Augustine, 'Exposition of Psalm 85', 221.

I want to draw three conclusions from these reflections of Augustine on his experience of prayer.

First, neither the Holy Spirit's 'crying out of us' nor our praying 'with Christ's voice' as we 'put on Christ' suggests for Augustine that the full human significance of prayer is under threat. The gift of prayer does not take anything away from us. God does not pull unilaterally on our vocal chords in a bizarre act of divine ventriloquism. Prayer is our voice, our breath, our body. Second, then, we are left in the rather strange territory of prayer being both genuine human offering and 'also itself the gift of God' (*De dono* 64). This suggests that there is something inherently complex about prayer that resolutely refuses the allocation of divine and human agency along the neatly delineated lines described by semi-Pelagianism in its teaching on grace. If prayer is paradigmatic of all *labora*, then by extension all human action is complexly 'at once something that God gives and something that I do'.[65] Finally, to return briefly to the vexing issue of Anglican identity, if the law of prayer has a role to play in the search for Anglican identity then it is precisely here in the christological context of prayer Augustine knew so well. A reading of the *lex orandi* that it is alert to these christological dynamics pushes beyond the desire to locate common identity in the things seen in context of liturgical practicality. Instead, the so-called 'bonds of affection' Anglicanism seeks are exactly that: relationships forged in the shared but unseen experience of participating in the praying life of Jesus Christ. As Richard Hooker instructed in a remarkable christological excursion nestled within his discussion of uniformity and common prayer in Book V of the *Lawes*, which

[65] Ticciati, *A New Apophaticism*, 96; see also Coakley's articulation of prayer as 'a movement of divine reflexivity, a sort of answering of God to God in and through the one who prays', in *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 113.

was written during a period of significant liturgical contestation, Jesus Christ is not only the source but the means by which the church is held together.[66]

What this attention to the work of the *lex orandi* has revealed is that Augustine's theological response to semi-Pelagianism is built on the footings of his experience of God in prayer. Concerned as he often is by pastoral matters, Augustine is offering his audience a way of making sense, doctrinally speaking, of what is happening in the strange experience of prayer and so helping to shape their religious experience – at a very deep, affective level. But more than this, his doctrinal argument against semi-Pelagianism begins *from* prayer as well as invoking it and giving it shape along the way. If we want to know something of God's grace, we need to look first to the operations of that grace in the actual practices of the Christian life. The notion of non-competitive agency, the kind of which the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* writes up, does not therefore simply undergird the practice of prayer but is the doctrinal articulation of what is going on internally in prayer. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the *Nachdenken*, the theological thinking that comes after, makes sense of and has been complexified by the experience of God's 'non-conflictual' grace as felt in the prior and agentially complex realities of prayer.[67]

---

[66] Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Policy. Book V*, LVI. On this, see Lorraine Cavanagh, *By One Spirit: Reconciliation and Renewal in Anglican Life* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 60-63 and James Turrell, 'Uniformity and Common Prayer', in *A Companion to Richard Hooker*, ed. William J. Torrance Kirby (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 337-68.

[67] Interestingly, despite the apparent sidelining of spirituality in his prolegomena, Harnack does offer this intriguing assessment of Augustine elsewhere: 'Augustine's theology is to be understood upon the basis of the peculiar form of his piety. His religious theories are in part nothing else than explained frames of mind and experiences'. See Adolf von Harnack, *Outlines of the History of Dogma* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1893), 342.

## Conclusion

Initially, this article set out to provide theorization of a prominent feature of Anglican self-description that lacks sufficient theological grounding. So theorized, the *lex orandi* corrects, communicates and then complexifies Christian belief, reorienting the task of Christian theology toward its doxological end. Under the contemplative conditions of the *lex orandi* claims and arguments about God are situated within broader practices of relating to God in thought, speech, practice, imagination, posture, affect. As we soon discovered, however, the *lex orandi* has substantial implications in terms of both theological reflection on individual doctrines and for systematic theology more broadly that reach well beyond the bounds of any single ecclesial tradition. The overall argument the *lex orandi* makes, then, is that doctrinal claims are not adequately understood, either historically or theologically, if the spiritual practice from which they emerge is side lined.